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A contextual examination of reminiscence functions in older African-Americans

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ABSTRACT

Reminiscence functions have been shown to be associated with positive mental health and well-being in certain older adult populations. However, there is little known regarding the functions of reminiscence in older African-Americans. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived benefits and functions of reminiscence in a sample of community-dwelling older African-Americans. The purposive sample included African-American adults (N = 52) over the age of 60. Data were collected via focus groups and participant observations in senior centers and churches in an urban area in the Northeast. Participants' descriptions of the benefits and functions of reminiscence and researchers' journals were analyzed using immersion/crystallization technique as described by Borkan (1999). The following themes emerged from the data: 1) *Something Like a Big Dictionary*, 2) *Moving On*, 3) *Fellowship, Faith and Family*, 4) *Teaching the Young* and 5) *A Brand New Knowledge of Ourselves*. Using Webster's taxonomy of Reminiscence Functions to compare and contrast data, results provide contextual support for the reminiscence functions of: Identity, Teach/Inform, Intimacy Maintenance, Problem Solving, and Conversation in this sample of older African-Americans. These participants viewed reminiscing for Boredom Reduction, Bitterness Revival, and Death Preparation as negative and "leads to depression". These findings have implications for how reminiscence is facilitated with older African-American adults to improve their mental health and well-being. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

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~~A Contextual Examination of Reminiscence Functions in Older African-Americans~~ Since Robert Butler's (1963) noteworthy article over 45 years ago proposing that reminiscence in older adults was part of a normal life review process, reminiscence researchers have examined different aspects of reminiscence such as: its benefits for older adults and healthcare providers, associations with mental health and well-being, types and functions of reminiscence, and the adaptive nature of reminiscence (Cappeliez & O'Rourke, 2006; Cappeliez, O'Rourke, & Chaudhry, 2005; Haight & Webster, 2002). Despite studies demonstrating the effectiveness of reminiscence in other countries including Taiwan, Japan, and the Netherlands, little work has been conducted on

the functions of reminiscence in different ethnic groups in the United States. For example, Merriam (1993) found that blacks used reminiscence more than whites for teaching others about the past and for understanding themselves. Washington (2009) developed and tested a modified version the Reminiscence Functions Scale with Hispanics, Whites and Blacks. Although, the scale was found to be reliable and valid measure of reminiscence functions in the diverse sample (N = 271), no results describing reminiscence functions were presented. Furthermore, in a critical review of reminiscence research, Hof, Bohlmeijer, and Webster (2010) describe the lack of research among different ethnic groups as a significant limitation in the reminiscence literature. As part of their conceptual model for future reminiscence research and practice, ethnicity is described as a moderator variable that may influence the occurrence, process, and outcomes of reminiscence. With limited work conducted regarding

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70 ethnicity and reminiscence functions, the authors recommend
71 studies be conducted to compare reminiscence functions
72 between ethnic groups.

73 Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to describe older
74 African-American adults' perceptions of the functions and
75 benefits of reminiscence and compare findings using Web-
76 ster's Taxonomy of Reminiscence Functions.

77 Theoretical framework

78 This program of reminiscence research is based on the
79 Theory of Cognitive Adaptation (O'Rourke, 2002). According
80 to this theory, the way that people review and interpret their
81 personal relationships and life histories is significantly
82 associated with wellness in later life. The key construct of
83 the theory is "cognitive reconstruction". Individuals are
84 assisted to think differently about a phenomenon. Through
85 reminiscence there is reconstruction of negative thoughts,
86 attitudes, and beliefs. The strategies that promote reminis-
87 cence as an intervention to decrease minor depressive
88 symptoms are; 1) identifying negative thinking and shifting
89 to more positive thinking, 2) generating alternative thinking
90 about the past (reframing thinking), 3) identifying coping
91 strategies and 4) emphasizing competence (Cappeliez, 2007).
92 There has been a strong link between integrative reminis-
93 cence and physical and mental well-being (Cappeliez &
94 O'Rourke, 2006). For this program of research, it is hypoth-
95 esized that facilitating the reminiscence process with an older
96 adult by a supportive listener and validating the older adult's
97 life experiences, acknowledging past coping skills, and
98 emphasizing accomplishments will assist the older adult to
99 develop a sense of self-worth and attain ego-integrity through
100 a positive recollection of experiences. This process decreases
101 feelings of regret, despair and other negative thoughts that
102 emerge as depressive symptoms in day to day life activities.
103 Therefore, understanding the function reminiscence serves
104 for the individual is important for the reminiscence facilitator
105 in order to encourage the older adult to interpret his or her
106 experiences in a positive way. Results from this study provide
107 important data regarding the functions and perceived benefits
108 of reminiscence in an older African-American population so
109 that appropriate reminiscence programs can be developed
110 with this population to identify past coping strategies and
111 reframe thinking in a positive way.

112 Reminiscence

113 Reminiscence is a naturally occurring process in which one
114 recalls past experiences. This process occurs across the life
115 span, may be spontaneous or facilitated by an active listener,
116 and may occur in isolation or in the company of others
117 (Butler, 1963; Westerhof et al., 2010). Reminiscence scholars
118 have demonstrated that this process comes in many forms.
119 For example, reminiscence has been grouped into as few as
120 two types (Romaniuk & Romanuk, 1981) and as many as six
121 types (Watt & Wong, 1991; Webster, 1993). Romaniuk and
122 Romaniuk (1981) grouped reminiscence as intrapersonal and
123 interpersonal. Intrapersonal, was described as a private
124 process and more evaluative in nature while interpersonal
125 reminiscence was identified as conversational and a social
126 process. Watt and Wong (1991) identified a taxonomy of

127 reminiscence that included six different types. Their taxono-
128 my includes: 1) integrative reminiscence when there is
129 acceptance of self and others and integration of the past and
130 present; 2) instrumental reminiscence, defined as drawing
131 from past experiences to solve present day problems; 3)
132 transmissive reminiscence, similar to storytelling and oral
133 history when there is a sharing of personal wisdom from one
134 generation to another; 4) escapist reminiscence, referred to as
135 defensive reminiscence occurs when one seeks comfort from
136 people and events; 5) obsessive reminiscence, characterized
137 by persistent rumination of unpleasant events often accom-
138 panied by feelings of guilt, shame and resentment; and 6)
139 narrative reminiscence, having more of a descriptive nature,
140 consisting of the recounting of past events without interpre-
141 tation or evaluation. The development of this taxonomy has
142 led to work on the specific functions of reminiscence in order
143 to understand the therapeutic effects that clinicians observe
144 as they facilitate reminiscence with older adults, and to
145 improve outcome studies.

146 Reminiscence functions

147 Webster developed and tested the Reminiscence Functions
148 Scale (RFS) that allows for the measurement of eight
149 functions of reminiscence identified as: 1) identity problem-
150 solving, 2) teach/inform, 3) conversation, 4) boredom
151 reduction, 5) bitterness revival, 6) death preparation, 7)
152 intimacy maintenance and 8) problem solving (1993;1997).
153 The RFS, a 43-item scale, is designed to measure all of the
154 stated reminiscence functions across the life span. The RFS
155 scale has consistently been shown to be reliable and valid
156 (Robitaille, Cappeliez, Coulombe, & Webster, 2010; Webster,
157 1993, 1997, 2003) and has been utilized to demonstrate
158 associations between reminiscence functions and mental
159 health and well-being (Cappeliez & O'Rourke, 2002, 2006).
160 Although results confirmed the RFS as reliable and valid for
161 conducting research with older adults, there are limits to the
162 generalizability of its use with different ethnic groups
163 because studies were mostly conducted with Canadian and
164 American Caucasian populations

165 Research has shown that experiences of discrimination,
166 prejudice, and poverty cause African-American older adults
167 to suffer more psychological distress than whites, yet African-
168 Americans are more likely to be under-diagnosed and under-
169 treated for depression than other ethnic groups (Das, Olsson,
170 McCurtis, & Weissman, 2006). These findings in addition to
171 the limited reminiscence research conducted with older
172 African-Americans, warrant the exploration of why and
173 when older African-Americans think about the past to
174 examine the data for similarities and differences in the
175 reminiscence functions as described by Webster (1993,
176 1997).

177 For the purpose of this study, reminiscence is defined as
178 the recollection of memories. The following research aims
179 guided the study:

- 180 1) To explore the perceived benefits and functions of
181 reminiscence in a sample of community-dwelling older
182 African-Americans from the Northeast.
- 183 2) To compare and contrast contextual findings with Web-
184 ster's taxonomy of Reminiscence Functions.

185 **Methods**186 *Research design*

187 A descriptive study design using focus group methodology
188 was employed to determine participants' perceptions of the
189 benefits and functions of reminiscence.

190 *Procedure*

191 Approval for the study was obtained from the university's
192 internal review board. African-American research assistants
193 were trained to conduct culturally sensitive interviews, and
194 participated in the protection of human subjects training
195 required by the university. An African-American research
196 assistant was selected to collect the data because shared
197 group membership has been described as a way of facilitating
Q10 198 discussion and disclosure of sensitive topics (Jackson, 1991)
199 and inclusion of researchers who belong to the ethnic group
200 under study has the potential to reduce the threats to a valid
Q11 201 research process (Porter & Villarruel, 1993). The research
202 assistant read the consent form to each participant. Once the
203 participant's understanding of the study was confirmed by the
204 research assistant, the consent form was signed before data
205 collection began. Inclusion criteria for participation in the
206 study included: 1) being African-American born in the United
207 States, 2) 60 years of age and older, and 3) community
208 dwelling. In this study African-American is defined as persons
209 having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa
210 including Caribbean Blacks. Eight focus groups (N = 52) were
211 conducted until data saturation was reached. Participants
212 were provided a \$25.00 gift card as a thank you for their time
213 and expertise.

214 *Focus group procedure*

215 A focus group guide was developed by the PI for the
216 facilitator and then piloted with two African-American
217 older adults. No changes were necessary. Content of the
218 facilitator guide included study information, a procedure
219 for introductions, directions for conducting the focus
220 groups, and the open-ended questions. The same guide
221 was used for each focus group. The focus groups were
222 audio-taped and timed, and the facilitator took notes of his
223 observations during the time the participants completed
224 the survey. A separate room was secured by the PI or RA at
225 the senior center or church to ensure privacy during the
226 focus group sessions.

227 The demographic form was completed first by the
228 participants, followed by introductions and an ice-breaker
229 question. The focus group sessions explored the partici-
230 pants' perceptions of reminiscence. To better understand
231 African-Americans' perceptions toward the functions of
232 reminiscence, the participants were asked open-ended
233 questions as part of the inquiry: 1) Describe for me in
234 detail one of your most positive memories, 2) Describe
235 when you find yourself thinking about the past more often
236 than at other times, 3) What does reminiscence mean to
237 you, 4) What are the benefits of thinking about your past?
238 The open-ended questions were developed by the investi-
239 gator based on the research questions under investigation.

Sample and setting

240

241 This study took place in two senior communities in an
242 urban center located in the northeast section of the United
243 States. Two churches and two senior centers whose partici-
244 pants are African-American and Caribbean Black composed
245 the participants in this study. In qualitative research,
246 participants are selected to maximize appropriate informa-
247 tion relevant to the research question (Crabtree & Miller,
248 1999). For this study, the sample was purposively selected to
249 obtain rich information regarding community-dwelling
250 older African Americans' perceptions about the benefits
251 and functions of reminiscence. Sixty percent of the partici-
252 pants in this study reported that they were born in the South
253 with all others citing an urban city in the Northeast as their
254 birthplace, the mean age of the sample was 72 (SD = 6.9),
255 90% of the sample were female and 38% reported that they
256 had graduated from high school.

Data collection

257

258 The focus groups were conducted by the African-American
259 research assistant who was trained by the PI. Data saturation
260 was reached after six focus groups were conducted. Group size
261 ranged from four to eight participants. Demographic informa-
262 tion was collected using a PI developed form. All focus groups
263 were digitally audio-taped. Additionally, the focus group
264 facilitator took notes during the sessions. Debriefing sessions
265 were held after each focus group to review the process. This
266 iterative process enabled the researchers to address potential
267 issues before the next group was conducted.

Data analysis

268

269 Demographic characteristics and descriptive data were
270 analyzed using SPSS 17. The PI and research assistant (RA)
271 communicated weekly to discuss study progress. Continual
272 analysis of the data occurred during these debriefing sessions
273 as new data were discussed and reflected upon. For example,
274 contextual data from reflective journals, audio tapes, and key
275 informant interviews were analyzed using the immersion/
276 crystallization (IC) technique described by Borkan (1999).
277 This interpretive technique is intuitive, more engaged, and
278 more fluid during all stages of the research process from
279 planning of the research study to the description of results.

280 The steps to this analysis process are: 1) initial engagement
281 with the topic, 2) crystallization, 3) immersion and illumina-
282 tion from collected data and texts, 4) explication and synthesis,
283 5) consideration of alternative interpretations and 6) reporting
284 the account. Analysis is constant, and reflective, and there is a
285 repeated delving into and experiencing of the data throughout
286 the study (Borkan, 1999). This analysis was selected because IC
287 occurs before data collection, during the study design and
288 planning, during and after data collection, and as the write-up
289 or reporting is completed and appropriately fit with the
290 specific aims of this study. Table 1 provides an example of the
291 development of the theme of Moving On. Although Moving On
292 represents the participants' thoughts about the importance of
293 not dwelling on painful experiences, it was the repeated
294 reviewing of data and immersion that enlightened the
295 researcher to understand the power of the painful memories.

t1.1 **Table 1**
Development of theme, moving on, using immersion/crystallization.

t1.2	Immersion/ t1.3 crystallization	Process	Examples of Insights/interpretations
t1.4	Initial	Recording/discussion of the reminiscence	Reminiscence is a natural process among the participants.
t1.5	engagement	process among older African-Americans.	The participants enjoy reminiscing with one another.
t1.6	Describing	Field notes	The participants proved strong social support to one another.
t1.7		Debriefing sessions with research team	Participants shared both positive and negative memories.
t1.8	Crystallization	Insights gained during the study.	Moving on past the painful experience is a way of coping.
t1.9			Remembering family, friends, faith is another coping mechanism.
t1.10	Immersion/ illumination	Reviewing data repeatedly.	Memories of being discriminated against or abused emerge continually despite trying to put them aside.
t1.11	Consideration	Reviewing insights with colleagues.	Ph.D. prepared researcher reviewed data trail.
t1.12	of alternative interpretations		Discussed findings with senior center director.
t1.13	Reporting	Manuscript development	Although the participants report they do not reminisce to keep painful memories alive, the
t1.14		Discussion of findings with participants	experiences come forth. Further research examining the frequency of the reminiscence functions in this population and associations with mental health and well-being in needed.

296 Despite attempts to push these experiences aside, the stories of
297 discrimination and abuse emerged time after time.

298 *Qualitative rigor*

Q12 299 According to Guba and Lincoln (1985), qualitative rigor
300 emerges from credibility, auditability, and fittingness. Cred-
301 itibility or trustworthiness of the data was insured by training
302 research assistants, periodic debriefing session, and pro-
303 longed engagement with the data.

304 During training sessions, the research assistant was asked
305 to share his beliefs about the functions of reminiscence in
306 older African-Americans so he could set potential biases
307 aside. These discussions allowed for clear documentation of
308 the participants' beliefs about reminiscence. Prolonged en-
309 gagement or spending time within the culture allows for trust
310 to develop and adds depth to the overall understanding of the
311 subject. The research assistant spent time at the sites,
312 participating in various activities with the senior center nurse
313 and directors, and conducting participant observations. Audit-
314 ability or ability of another investigator to follow the decision
315 trail of the researcher from the beginning of data analysis to the
316 end was achieved as an experienced researcher not involved in
317 the study was asked to review the decision trail from
318 highlighting meaningful segments to data synthesis and
319 development of the themes. Fittingness refers to the transfer-
320 ability of the findings to others. Fittingness of the study was
321 addressed by seeking out older African-Americans in senior
322 centers and churches who were willing to provide their
323 thoughts about reminiscence. It is important to be mindful
324 that results this from study reflect the beliefs of this particular
325 group of community-dwelling older African-Americans born
326 and living in the United States. Other sub-groups within the
327 African-American population may have different views regard-
328 ing reminiscence.

329 **Results**

330 The research aim to explore community-dwelling older
331 African-Americans' perceived benefits and functions of rem-
332 iniscence in community-dwelling older African-Americans
333 from the Northeast was answered using open-ended ques-

tions. Analysis of the contextual data resulted in the following 330
themes: 1) *Something Like a Big Dictionary*, 2) *Moving On*, 3) 353
Fellowship, Faith and Family, 4) *Teaching Others* and 5) *A Brand* 354
New Knowledge of Ourselves. The following are descriptions of 355
the major themes that emerged from the contextual data. 356
Themes are represented by participant quotes. 357

Something like a big dictionary 358

The most overwhelming theme emerging from these data 359
was the participants' perceptions of reminiscence as reviewing 360
and learning from a large collection of positive and negative 361
experiences they acquired over the years. The reminiscence 362
process enabled them to learn from experiences, to prevent 363
mistakes from happening again, to teach others, to cope with 364
current situations, and to learn about themselves. The 365
following participant quote represents this theme: 366

When I think about the past it's been very, very constant for 367
me. And it's something like a big dictionary to look back on 368
to help me raise my kids, grandkids and solve any problems. 369
I really do use my past for mistakes I made, how I've lost and 370
how I've gained. And I think it's a blessing to have that. 371
372

Moving on 373

While the participants acknowledged their collection of 374
experiences were positive and negative, it was clear that it is 375
important for them not to dwell on the more negative 376
memories. The theme, *Moving On*, emerged as the participants 377
reviewed the items pertaining to reminiscence functions of 378
bitterness revival and death. For example, when asked to 379
respond to the item "I reminisce to keep painful memories alive", 380
one participant stated the following: 381

I wouldn't dare reminisce to keep painful memories alive. It 382
takes too much energy to remember when someone did this 383
or that.....it's wasted energy. I say, okay this happened, you 384
say what you want to say and then you move on. 385
386

Many of the participants supported this theme with 387
statements such as, "I put the past behind me, I might think 388

389 about those times, but then it's gone," and "you can't help but
390 think about those times, but just don't dwell."

391 A significant pattern associated with Moving On was the
392 participants' thoughts regarding reminiscing to prepare for
393 death. Statements such as, "no one thinks about dying, we think
394 about living," "thinking about the past to prepare for death
395 makes me depressed," and "if thoughts of death come into my
396 head, I don't dwell, I move on."

397 Although the participants repeatedly stated they would
398 never purposefully think about the past to revive older hurts
399 or keep painful memories alive, stories of discrimination and
400 spousal abuse emerged frequently without the facilitator
401 specifically asking about these painful memories. For exam-
402 ple, the question asking the participants to describe in detail
403 one of their most positive memories brought up the
404 following:

405 *Well, um, it's supposed to be positive because it has to deal*
406 *with civil rights, but I grew up in Baltimore and it was really*
407 *segregated. I was the first student to go to a white school and*
408 *I was really happy about that, but then I got off the bus.....it*
409 *was just so many people out there with signs, you know.*
410 *"Send the niggers back to Africa", "We don't want you." Real*
411 *hurtful things and it scared me to death. It was one of the*
412 *worse times of my life, felt so low, you know, they really*
413 *messed up my self esteem and I'm telling you it was not a*
414 *good time for us.*

416 Fellowship, family, and faith

417 The strong fellowship between the participants was
418 evidenced in their statements of support for one another
419 during each focus group session. Throughout the transcripts,
420 statements from participants such as "yes", "that's me, too,"
421 "Amen," "that was beautiful," after someone's story or
422 recollection of a particular experience. The experiences
423 most meaningful and positive to the participants were the
424 memories of family. This participant recalled a positive
425 memory about her grandfather:

426 *"I loved walking behind my grandfather, never beside him,*
427 *never holding his hands but it was a joy to walk behind him.*
428 *Maybe looking back it was just following in his footsteps. I*
429 *loved working with him in the garden—that was the greatest*
430 *time of all." Another participant recalls family reunions and*
431 *the happiness the memories bring: "Happy times are our*
432 *family reunions and the videos we made. I just sit and watch*
433 *day after day and laugh; and then the baby pictures that*
434 *come across or all the members that join the family. So, you*
435 *know, you see a lot of the people that are no longer with us,*
436 *but it still brings back the happiness, the happy, happy*
437 *times."*

438
439 The importance and strength of faith of the participants
440 was strongly evident throughout the data. For example,
441 "when I think about the dealings of the Lord, what he has done
442 for me, I just get excited." During introductions at the start of
443 the focus groups, most were reflective about their faith with

comments such as, "I couldn't have made it without my Jesus," 444
"I put God in my life, and things are going good," and "when I 445
think about the past, I think about the things of the Lord and how 446
I can stay saved." 447

Teaching the young 448

449 One of the most important reminiscence functions for this
450 sample that emerged from the data was teaching and
451 informing the younger generation. Comments such as "the 452
family history, they need to know that," and "we have strong 453
roots and I want to pass that on." Thinking about the past and 454
talking to younger family members about what they learned 455
from these experiences is illustrated in the following 456
participant quote:

457 *Even though we raised our children, we still raising our*
458 *grandchildren because they don't have the moral values that*
459 *they should have. You know it's so good that we are our age*
460 *and we know what the good values are because these*
461 *children don't know what we know and we steadily say to*
462 *them, "you got to do better". But, they want to know why.*
463 *See, we already know why and we pass it on.* 464

A brand new knowledge of ourselves 465

466 At the end of the sessions, the participants commented on
467 how much they enjoyed reminiscing and, in some cases, the
468 focus group experience seemed to change their minds about
469 reminiscing:

470 *This was so different than I thought it would be. When I first*
471 *came in here I said he is going to start talking and asking me*
472 *a bunch of stupid questions. I was wrong. Now, I have a*
473 *whole new knowledge about myself with reminiscing.* 474

475 While this theme of a brand new knowledge emerged
476 frequently, there were strong feelings among the participants
477 that people should ask them more often about their past. This
478 is evidenced by the following participant quote:

479 *If we didn't think anything of ourselves before, we do now.*
480 *We're walking out of here with a brand new knowledge of*
481 *ourselves. We are very special people, this age group, we are*
482 *very special. If people would only realize what we know...our*
483 *past history... maybe they would come and say "well, what*
484 *do you know about things of the past?"* 485

Discussion and implications 486

487 This is the first known study to explore community-
488 dwelling older African-Americans' perceptions of the func-
489 tions and benefits of reminiscence. Themes that emerged
490 from the data provide valuable information for health care
491 providers and researchers in the way that African-American
492 older adults review their experiences and for what functions.
493 This information, however, is only the first step to better
494 understanding the complexities of reminiscence functions in
495 older African-Americans.

Results from this study suggest that there are differences in the functions of reminiscence in older African-Americans when compared to Webster's Taxonomy of Reminiscence Functions derived from an all white sample which has implications for: 1) how reminiscence is facilitated with this population for mental health and well-being, 2) reminiscence program development, and 3) future reminiscence research with different ethnic groups. Using Webster's taxonomy of Reminiscence Functions to compare and contrast the contextual data, the themes presented in this paper provide insight into the functions of reminiscence and what that means to this sample. According to the participants, reminiscence is perceived as a collection of both positive and negative memories they can look back on and use to cope with present problems, to teach younger generations, and to learn about themselves. Additionally, reminiscing about family, faith, and fellowship brings them much happiness and joy, while reminiscing about negative experiences, to reduce boredom, or prepare for death is to be avoided.

The first theme, *Something Like a Big Dictionary*, supports the reminiscence function of problem solving as described by Webster (1993, 1997). The reminiscence function of problem solving is defined as reminiscing to look back at past problem solving strategies to solve current problems. Participants described difficult times such as spousal abuse, illness, discrimination, and death of a child, and how they "made it thorough" these experiences. According to this sample, recalling these experiences assists them to deal with current everyday problems.

The second theme "Moving On", illuminates the participants' thoughts on the benefit to avoiding reminiscing for death preparation or bitterness revival. Death preparation, according to Webster's taxonomy (1993, 1997) is reminiscing to lessen anxiety about death and develop a sense of wholeness as one approaches the end of life. While this function is viewed as a positive function by reminiscence researchers, it is important to note that the participants viewed reminiscing for death preparation as a negative process which could lead to depression. The reminiscence function of Bitterness Revival refers to reviewing memories of experiences of being treated unfairly. Considering the history of discrimination this generation has experienced, it is understandable that the focus of their reminiscences would be on positive memories. For example, Ruggiero and Taylor (1997) suggested minimizing experiences of discrimination as a protective mechanism resulting in higher self-esteem and sense of control for the oppressed group, while Taylor (2001) suggested that African-Americans learned to ignore negative experiences and didn't talk about them as a coping strategy. However, it should be noted that while participants reported they thought about happy memories only, stories of discrimination and abuse were shared without the participants being asked to describe their negative experiences. These findings are similar to work conducted by Shellman (2004) in which older African-Americans reminisced about their experiences of discrimination without being asked. Results from these studies speak to the impact that years of discrimination have on the lives of the participants and have implications for their mental health and well-being. For example, in a literature review of empirical research on perceived discrimination and health conducted by Williams and Mohammed (2009), an inverse relationship was found

between perceived discrimination and mental health outcomes. Jang, Chiriboga, and Small (2008) suggest that for individuals suffering from psychosocial consequences of discriminatory experiences interventions should be conducted that increase personal control, increase self-esteem, and self-worth. Using the Theory of Cognitive Adaptation (O'Rourke, 2002) as a model, integrative reminiscence is a useful intervention for preventing and reducing poorer mental health outcomes. For example, a trained facilitator would assist the older adult to identify and talk about the discrimination experiences, point out positive coping strategies to reframe thinking in a more positive way so the older adult becomes aware of his or her strengths and begins to feel an increase in self-worth and self esteem.

The most positive memories for this sample included stories about their fellowship, families, and faith. Strengthening family ties, and cultivating faith and fellowship reveal the strengths of this population which served as survival strategies while growing up under harsh circumstances (Eyerman, 2001; Liberato, Fennell, & Jeffries, 2008). The fellowship among the participants was observed through body language and was evident in their supportive comments of one another in the transcripts. This finding supports previous work by Shellman & Mokel (2009) in which peer support was noted during health education sessions conducted as a usual care group in a reminiscence intervention study. Recalling positive memories of family and faith corresponds with the reminiscence functions of conversation, suggesting a social and positive function of reminiscence for this population. In this study, participants spoke fondly of family members who had passed away, suggesting that reminiscing for intimacy maintenance is a positive function of reminiscence for this sample. This finding differs from the model of reminiscence functions and mental health (Cappeliez & O'Rourke, 2006; Cappeliez et al., 2005) in which reminiscence for intimacy maintenance is associated with negative emotions or possibly depressive symptoms. It is important to note the sample from those studies included older adults, 90% living in Australia or New Zealand suggesting that the sample significantly differed from the population participating in the current study. Further examination of the frequency of reminiscence for intimacy maintenance is needed to clarify whether this is a positive or negative function for the African-American population.

The theme *Teaching the Young* provides contextual support to the reminiscence function of Teach and Inform which measures the way recalling the past is used to share important life lessons (Webster, 1997). The participants spoke frequently of the need to teach the younger generation about what they went through and how they survived and is reflected in their comments, "we are strong," and "they need to know our strong roots and morals." This finding describing the importance of sharing coping strategies with children is supported by Liberato et al. (2008) who interviewed older African-American women about their lived experiences during segregation. The theme *Teaching the Young* has implications for the development of intergenerational programs to promote this reminiscence function in older adults and educating the younger generation.

The last theme, *A Brand New Knowledge About Ourselves*, refers to the function of Identity as described by Webster (1993, 1997). Reminiscing for identity means using

experiences to find worth and meaning in the life one has lived. This theme appeared most often at the end of the transcripts when the facilitator was closing the session. The participants reflected and commented on what reminiscing did for them during the focus groups. This finding supports reminiscence work by Shellman (2004) and Shellman & Mokel (2009) conducted with older African-Americans demonstrating that reminiscence does have benefits for this population such as acknowledging coping mechanisms and decreasing depressive symptoms.

These findings have implications for health care professionals conducting reminiscence with older African-Americans. According to the Theory of Cognitive Adaptation (O'Rourke, 2002), the way people think about the past is associated with mental health and well-being. Allowing older African-Americans to verbalize and process their negative experiences is an important first step to assist them to think differently about their memories. The next steps; identifying coping strategies with them, focusing on their strengths, and facilitating memories about family, faith and fellowship will enable the reminiscer to reframe their thinking and gain a brand new knowledge about themselves leading to positive mental health and well-being.

Conclusions and future research

This study is the first step in understanding reminiscence functions in older African-Americans. Using Webster's taxonomy of Reminiscence Functions, results provide contextual support for the reminiscence functions of: Identity, Teach/Inform, Intimacy Maintenance, Problem Solving and Conversation in this sample of older African-Americans. These participants viewed reminiscing for Boredom Reduction, Bitterness Revival, and Death Preparation as negative and "leads to depression". Despite comments, "we reminisce for happy times only and forget the bad ones", stories of discrimination and abuse emerged in the data.

The next step towards better understanding reminiscence functions in older African-Americans is to determine the frequency with which this population reminisces with these specific reminiscence functions in mind. This research project, which is currently underway, will also examine the underlying constructs of the Modified Reminiscence Functions Scale and determine whether the data supports the existing factors of the scale. These data will provide the groundwork for researchers to then examine associations of reminiscence functions with mental health and well-being of older African-Americans. This area of reminiscence research, which has been virtually ignored, is essential in promoting the mental health and well-being of this population.

Uncited references

- Brown, 1999 Delete
Haight and Webster, 1995 Delete
Shellman et al., 2007

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